

Editorial...

Planning Board Hearing Should Spark Interest

After some 8 years of discussion, review policy deliberations and changing development realities in Duxbury, the Planning Board has finished overhauling the regulations for subdividing land. If on face value the topic sounds boring, it isn't. And whether you're new to town or a long-time resident, if you care about Duxbury's rural character and charm, or if you own or live near property that may one day be developed, you need to be at Town Hall at 8 next Monday night when the Board holds a public hearing on its proposed changes to the Town's subdivision rules.

During the mid-1970's, Duxbury took 2 critical steps toward securing a future compatible with the past. Town meeting adopted a new, innovative zoning bylaw that paved the way for different types of housing and a "development economics" approach to determining whether non-traditional projects would benefit the community. By authorizing the Appeals Board and Planning Board to consider development costs, tax revenues, and intangible gains like open space, architectural design control and neighborhood impacts, Duxbury voters showed unusual foresight. On the one hand, everyone agreed that Duxbury should remain primarily residential. On the other hand, they understood that the public cost of endless single-family home developments would break the bank--the Town's treasury--because of spiraling school enrollments.

Once the new zoning was in place, the Planning Board produced a new set of subdivision rules. The Board realized that regardless of its recent zoning victories and the development innovations they promised, most vacant land would convert to housing by way of the conventional subdivision process. This means that so long as certain basic zoning requirements are met, such as the size of a house lot, a developer can apply for approval to divide a site into the number of legally allowed lots by providing adequate access into the property. "Access" means roads. The truth is, subdivision rules are more complex than what a road looks like and how it is built, but the ultimate point of regulating is to make sure that future residents of these developments have safe and appropriate means of getting to and from their homes, and adequate facilities to support housing.

The "adequate facilities" piece of the equation involves aspects of a development that are adjunct to roads; utilities, drainage, sidewalks. When the 1977 Planning Board adopted the rules that have been in place since, much of the Town's vacant land was still in large enough tracts to make uniform standards a practical solution. When those standards didn't work so well, the Board could--and historically, did--waive some of its requirements. Over time, waivers became the norm.

Planning Boards have been criticized for waiving their subdivision requirements too much. Virtually hundreds of developments have been built under the 1977 rules (which have been nominally amended from time to time in the intervening 19 years), but you will find sidewalks in less than a handful. Countless roads have been constructed that fall short of minimum paved width

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standards. Some have very steep slopes. While onlookers from other land use boards and development abutters have protested Planning Board waivers, the Boards that made these decisions had policy reasons for doing what they did. They were trying to preserve the rural look and feel of Duxbury because that's what the last Comprehensive Plan said they should do.

Times change. The population has swelled and many new people live in Duxbury--in large part because of new subdivisions. Some people bemoan the lack of sidewalks on their streets. They say the combination of no walkways and narrow roads makes pedestrian and bicycle travel unsafe in their neighborhoods.

Developers, meanwhile, have found it difficult to forecast just what the Town would require because the rules say one thing, but practice has produced something else. "Practice" has evolved in the hands of a changing Planning Board, and changes in engineering review. The Board historically relied on consulting engineers and still does, but Duxbury now has a Town Engineer, too. What developers grew accustomed to under one engineer's review system began to shift a few years ago, for the Town Engineer's standards were not always the same. The result: occasions of conflict, an unpredictable process, and shifting philosophy about what makes a "good" subdivision.

The current Planning Board and Town Planner deserve enormous credit for finishing a project that started years ago and became bogged down by changes in Board membership, changes in staff, and different priorities that sometimes needed urgent solutions. They are trying to synchronize their written rules with the realities of Duxbury's remaining developable land, and to create a fair, predictable process for land owners, developers, and neighbors of sites that will one day find their way into the subdivision approval system. At the same time, the Board has been mindful of something the 1969 Comprehensive Plan said, and which the recent Long-Range Planning Survey echoed with striking unanimity: preserving Duxbury's rural character is the most important land use policy objective in this community.

If you agree, we think you should spare an hour or 2 next Monday night to hear the Planning Board's presentation and register your own opinion. There is little more frustrating to local officials than working in a vacuum--only to then take eleventh-hour complaints that could have been resolved had anyone bothered to follow a simple, open process.

You have an opportunity to participate in major policy decisions that will have long-lasting impacts on your community.